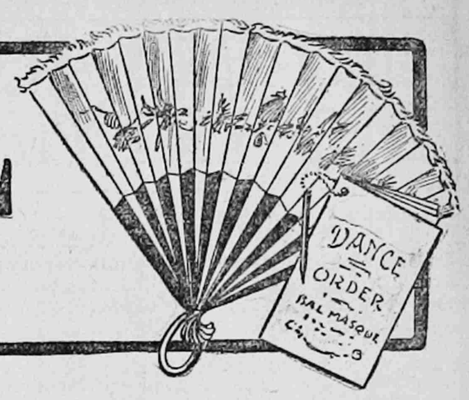
The FANCY-DRESS BALL

By ARABELLA KENEALY



SHE was dressing for a ball, fortunately a fancy ball. Otherwise she would have been unable to dress for it, lacking frocks and means to purchase frocks. However, she chanced to be the fortunate possessor of a beautiful old faded gown which had belonged tn a great-grand mother. She had chosen the character of "My Great-Grandmother," and if her great-grandmother had looked as charming as she did in this quaint brocaded silk with its patterning of rosebuds and true lovers' knots and its fine age-toned lace, the romantic thing that happened needs no explanation.

She had fastened the last of a row of silk-embroidered buttons, when she felt something crackle in the bosom of the dress. Investigation showed a stiffened square and faded stitching as though something many years before had been sewn into the lining of the bodice. She had allowed herself time and to spare for her dressing, loitering deliciously over the rare delight of a grand toilet. She had leisure, therefore, to remove the bodice and sitting down ran her scissors through the faded silken stitches and withdrew a square of parchment tied with a yellow ribbon. In faded ink, but clearly and boldly, was set forth in a man's hand—the stiff quaint hand of a century earlier:

"To my beloved Ursula de Lisle Lyndon, in token of my undying affection, I bequeath the whole of my unentailed Monies and Property.

"(Signed) JOHN HERRIES."

The document was duly witnessed by a justice-of-the-peace and by another. It was dated "July the twentieth, 1803." Folded with it lay a tiny note:

"I have never claimed this, having more than sufficeth me. URSULA DE L. L."

"Well, Pamela," his great-grandson greeted her.

"Well, John!" her great-granddaughter responded.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

"Do I look at you like that? How do I look at you?"

"It is difficult to define, there's something different about you."

"To-night I am nearly a hundred years old," she laughed, courtesying in her silken rosebuds and true lovers' knots.

"I also," he said, in his great-grandfather's clothes. "Pam, I have never seen you look so—so well."

"John, I have never seen you look so—so sadly."

"They're not really so bad," he said carelessly, "and you see I had to belong to the same period as you to make our minuet decent."

"John I hope Lilian——"

His face clouded.

"She didn't altogether like it. But as I told her—you and I once shared bottles of baby's food."

"We never did!" she cried indignantly. "You were at school before I was christened."

"Anyhow, we've known one another all your life. I say, Pam."

"Go and dance and do your duty. There's no time to say more."

He drew a little age-stained package from a pocket of his snuff-brown coat. She turned whiter than her frock.

"Good gracious!" she faltered.

"A faded rose," he said, lifting the ragged flap and giving her a glimpse of shriveled fragments, and the faintest whiff of sweet perfume. He showed her the envelope. On it was written in the bold old-fashioned characters she knew: "Ursula wore it."

"Ursula was my great-grandmother," she said, with a tremulous lip.

"I know," he answered, his eyes on her curiously. He returned the envelope reverently to his pocket. "And my great-grandfather loved her."

"Why—why didn't they marry, John?"

He broke the silence of a half-minute abruptly. "Some one made mischief," he said hurrying off, "stopped letters and told lies."

The minuet went charmingly. A strange lady, who had come in somebody's party and chanced to sit beside Lilian Wilthorpe, observed upon it.

"How delightfully those two dance. What a beautiful girl and what a beautiful dress! I suppose that is the girl Mr. Herries is to marry."

"Then you suppose wrongly," Lilian retorted with an angry flush. "I am the girl."

"Mercy on us!" the discomfited lady murmured; "really, I am very sorry."

Lilian was a wit. She prided herself upon putting persons out of countenance, while admirably preserving her own.

"Perhaps you are his great-aunt Susan," she submitted ingenuously. "Otherwise I can scarcely see how his choice affects you."

"I meant to say, of course, I was sorry——" the poor lady began, in a flutter.

Lilian laughed good-humoredly.

"Oh, I understand," she said. "Pray don't apologize. I'm not at all thin-skinned!"

She was not. But it is difficult to guess why she perpetually boasted of it.

Herries was an easy-going person. When his mother had assured him he must marry money in the abstract, he had assented laughing. "Why not!" he said, money's an excellent thing."

When she had further informed him that he must marry money in the concrete form of Lilian Wilthorpe, the great brewer's only daughter, he had further assented, laughing, "Why not! She's a handsome, jolly sort of girl."

It did not occur to him to doubt the wisdom of his choice until his old friend Pamela congratulated him upon it. She showed herself so frank and smiled so beamingly and gratified that he turned of a sudden crusty. "One might think you were going to marry her, you seem so pleased," he grumbled. Pamela had never appeared to him so fair and delectable as she did at that moment, from behind the iron barrier of his brand-new engagement.

"Oh, I'm far too poor to think of being married," Pamela responded, laying her lashes demurely on her cheeks. And afterward he asked himself what the dickens she had meant.

Pamela was pacing up and down the little orchard using breezy language. About her the scene was pink-and-white, and magical with apple blossom and with cherry-bloom; under her feet the grass lay cool and green, above the sky was blue, and everywhere a sweet wind wantoned, laden with the fragrance of Spring flowers.

It was the morning following upon the ball. Her face wore still that irradiate brilliance the excitement and joy of a ball bring to some girls' faces, but her brows met frowningly, her eyes flashed, and at intervals she stopped to stamp a pretty foot.

As chance had it, Herries sprang presently over a breach in the low wall—Herrics in riding-breeches and with crop in hand.

"I say, Pamela," he said heartily; "good Lord! you're never crying."

"Of course, I'm not," she snapped. "Why in the name of everything absurd should I cry?"

"Who knows!" he said. "Why do women cry?" A dead canary. A spoilt bonnet. A cross word—Pamela," he broke in earnestly, "are you perfectly happy, you know. Is Miss Coventry always good to you?"

"I'm perfectly happy," she insisted, "and you shall not make horrid insinuations about my aunt."

"All right, all right," he said, good-humoredly, putting up large hands wherewith to defend himself, "don't annihilate me. I meant no harm. I've come on Jill and I've brought Jack to see if you've a mind to ride. Don't say no, Pam."

He was surprised to find that she said "yes" without any further ado. She was presently walking beside him to the house to dress. All of a sudden she stopped and faced about. "Where is Lilian?" she demanded. "Have you asked Lilian?"

"TO-NIGHT I AM NEARLY A HUNDRED YEARS OLD," SHE LAUGHED

He stood rubbing his hands reflectively. "If I knew what he to tell," he said, "I'd tell it. But you're so difficult. If I say I haven't asked Lilian, you'll probably preach to me about my duty, and if I confess I have asked Lilian you'll tilt your nose and tell me you refuse to figure as a substitute."

She laughed into his rueful countenance.

"I'll come under any circumstances," she retorted and tripped gaily on.

"Pam," he said boyishly, overcome with gratitude, "when you are friendly and nice it seems as though—as though there were three suns shining."

"Oh, what rubbish!" she cried hotly; "you forget you're not talking to Lilian."

He laughed to himself. It would have been rubbish had he talked it to Lilian.

Lilian's moods had no effect at all upon the weather. Half an hour after they had ridden away Lilian called to see Pamela. Informed that Miss Pamela was not at home, she asked for Miss Coventry.

"Oh, I did so want to see Pamela," was her breathless greeting. "It is most important. There is not an hour to spare. Do you think she would lend me that delicious frock she wore last night, so that I may have it copied exactly for a fancy ball in town?"

She went away some minutes later with Pamela's great-grandmother's gown and Herries's great-grandfather's will wrapped in brown paper on the front seat of her carriage.

That same evening she confronted John as he sat smoking in his library.

"I came across the lawn," she said. "I have something to say to you."

Her manner was hostile. He shrugged his shoulders. He was, of course, to be scolded for riding with Pamela. Lilian unfolded a small age-stained parchment. She described how she had come by it.

"Did you know of it?" she demanded. He stood white and perturbed.

"I wonder if Pamela has seen it," he said slowly. She repeated the question.

"I knew of it," he admitted. There was a long silence. Then she broke out contemptuously. "And you have defrauded Pamela all these years, and would have defrauded me—would have made me party to a cheat."

"I meant to tell you," he said, tonelessly.

She cried out scornfully: "Did you think I would consent to be a fraud?"

He turned and looked at her.

"Your estimate of me is scarcely flattering," he said stiffly.

"No, because I've found you out," she cried; "I see the whole mean plot. You would marry me for my money so as to make yourself safe in case the will were found. And you would go riding and paying attention to Pamela so that should it be found——"

She halted, lacking words and breath.

He turned away his face like a man ashamed. In a forced, unnatural voice he said. "Under this will I should have been a beggar, Lilian. The estate must have gone. I should have been liable for the interest and accumulation of all those years."

She laughed curtly. "I thought you well enough off to be marrying me for myself," she said. "I suppose it was in the character of a beggar that you asked me. Perhaps you would have had the honesty to declare the will and pay off the interest and accumulation when you had got my money with which to do it."

He kept his face averted. "Your opinion of me is—is staggering," he said, lamely.

"Not my opinion of you," she retorted smartly, "but yourself with the light let in on you."

"In a way," he said, "I admire you for your indignation. But are you not expressing it a bit coarsely?"

"I believe in calling spades spades," she retorted bluntly. After a minute—"Of course, you realize that under these circumstances all is over between us?"

"Oh, of course," he said, drawing a light breath.

Her face fell. She had not expected so easy an acceptance.

"Still," she resumed, hurriedly, "if you should do the honorable thing my money would be enough for——"

"I couldn't think of it," he broke in as hurriedly and with rather more eagerness.

"Oh, well," she cried, "as you please."

A flash of light darted prismatic from her hands. She had thrown her engagement ring upon the table.

"After all," she said bluntly, "it was bought with Pamela's money."

She turned to leave. She turned back to look at him. He carried off the situation well. Standing there, his fine frame erect, his head well up, she had never seen him look cooler or more composed.

She moved a pace toward him. "John," she began, and stopped short. The rage in his eyes showed her his composure as merely a mask. She knew that nothing she could do now or would cement the relations she had broken.

She changed her tone.

"What are you going to do about the will?"

"This," he said.

Before she could reach it, he had caught it from the table and had put it in the fire. He held her hands when she would have snatched it, smouldering, from the blaze. A moment later it was a blackened mass. Then he released her.

"You are a mean cad!" she cried, beside herself with anger. "I suppose there is no copy."

"Oh, yes," he returned coolly. "But it is in my possession."

"Well, I shall tell Pamela and everybody," she threatened, as she left him.

She met him two days later in a lane. He raised his hat and would have passed her. But she stopped in front of him.

"John," she appealed, "I said too much the other evening. I took too much for granted. I find you had already told Pamela."

His eyes wandered.

"Did Pamela tell you so?" he asked.

"Yes. She was quite angry with me. She said you told her long ago and offered to make everything right. Will you ever forgive me?"

"Never," he said, emphatically.

Then, as though the subject had no interest: "What reason did Pamela give?"

"Oh, some nonsense about not caring for money. It's plain, of course, that she's in love with you."

He winced as though he had been struck. "Great heavens!" he cried, "are you made of hemp and straw?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Possibly not," he retorted. "And have you told everybody else?"

"Of course, I haven't," she said sullenly. "And I apologize for all I said to you."

"Don't give it a second thought," he said, with absent looks. He lifted his hat again and left her looking after him.

When it was known that the engagement between Herries and Lilian was broken off, everybody asked everybody else to bear witness that it was exactly what she had foretold. For, said each, it had been plainer than a pike-staff that he had never cared two pins about her. Such love as there had been had been wholly on her side. And when later she became engaged to an impecunious actor, the reason she had thrown over Herries was still plainer. There are persons it is impossible to hoodwink.

These persons knew also that Herries engaged himself presently to Pamela Redwood merely from pique.

Others there were, however, who insisted that Pamela had never been so full of spirits and gay laughter as she had been immediately after Lilian had accepted Herries.

"Pamela, are you ill, dear?" Herries inquired of her, ruefully, once during their engagement. She would sit lost in thought, her hands clapsed on her knees, her eyes and mouth downcast. So she had been sitting now for some minutes, apparently forgetting him.

She roused herself with a flush and a start. She forced a laugh. "Ill?" she cried. "I have never been ill—I was merely thinking."

He pressed nearer to her. He took her hand and kissed it. "Darling," he said, "are you not happy? Pamela, there is something troubling you."

She broke away from him—she almost always broke away from his caresses. "There is nothing troubling me," she cried, petulantly. She gave an hysterical sob. "Of course, there is always a rift in the lute," she added, and fled weeping.

The subject of the will had not been broached. Once or twice the conversation had led up to it, but each had shied nervously and evaded it.

The wedding was over. Slippers for luck and confetti for confusion had been thrown. The bride and groom had seated themselves in the railway car reserved for them. There was a ten-minute run to a junction, after which there would be no stoppage for two hours, when they were due at the beautiful mountain resort where the honeymoon was to be spent.

Pamela was a silent, pallid bride, as she had been reserved during her engagement. Her nature seemed to have wholly changed. Herries found her quite incomprehensible. In a large and tolerant fashion he had made the best of it.

"Women are said to have moods," he told himself. "In time she will grow used to me, and I will learn how to manage her."

He seated her carefully, facing the engine. He arranged the window to her taste, so far as he could elicit from her preoccupied answers what might chance to be her taste. Then, placing himself opposite, he turned admiring, smiling looks upon his beautiful bride. She forced faint smiles in return, obviously forced and unsatisfactory.

"The rain has cleared," he said. "Darling, we shall have a heavenly fortnight."

She avoided his ardent eyes and murmured some incoherence.

"After we have passed the junction," he reflected, "I shall take her in my arms and kiss her and melt away this intolerable ice-wall."

But "the plans of mice and men going aft agley."

At the junction, just as the train was about to start, Pamela, who had risen and was standing by the door, said suddenly, in an excited voice, "John, I feel faint. Quick, please, get a flask of eau-de-Cologne from my dressing-bag." She put a key into his hand and pointed out a bag at the further end of the carriage. Concerned, he hurried to open it. He found no flask amid its many furnishings. With nervous hands he took out one silver-capped bottle after another.

The train began slowly to move. "What sort of a bottle is it, dear?" he demanded.

Receiving no answer. "Pam, dear," he insisted, "what sort of a bottle?"

Still receiving no reply, he turned, surprised. There was nobody there.

The train was now moving rapidly out of the station. In two strides he was at the carriage door, but a porter was before him and, with a running effort, banged and fastened it. By the time he could reopen it the engine had attained such speed that it would have been foolhardiness to jump out.

He had one glimpse of what he believed to be Pamela standing with a bewildered air upon the platform. He threw himself back upon a seat.

"Great heavens," he cried, distracted. "What does it mean? Has she gone suddenly mad?"

He caught sight of a small triangular note upon the seat before him. He tore it open and read, written in a tremulous hand.

"I shall leave you at the junction. Why didn't you tell me the truth, John? I have waited until the last moment, and if you had only spoken I could have forgiven everything—could have loved you even in spite of your having so wronged me. I cared enough for you to marry you to save your honor. The truth about the will was leaking out. Now nothing can be said. The money is honorably yours. But I cannot be the wife to one I cannot respect. You will never see me again."

He broke out into passionate exclamations.

"Oh, did ever a dear, romantic little woman think and write such rubbish?" he exclaimed. "As though I will leave a stone unturned before I find her. As though I will not find her and that soon."

For two whole hours, until, indeed, he stopped at that spot chosen for the honeymoon, he paced the carriage like a madman.

"What a fool—an utter fool I was not to tell her everything," he brooded. What would she do? Would she return home? He could not think it. She would not face her old friends and resume the old life in this new, anomalous position. When the train at length stopped he had fumed himself quiet. He got out and collected his baggage—her baggage also.

He took the next train to the junction. Almost he expected to find her waiting for him on the platform, repentant, lonely and unhappy. But she was not there.

Had she been weak enough for this she would have been too weak to do the thing she had done.

When Pamela slipped out of the carriage she had not left everything to chance. She had made her plans, and her single dread was lest the ruse of the faintness and the search for the flask should fail in aiding her flight. Her one hope was to escape without a word of explanation between them. Should he begin to persuade her—she was afraid of herself. She was assured that should she be persuaded, her judgment of him and her forfeited self-respect would stand forever afterward between them and happiness. Better a thousand times to leave him now, while her contempt for his conduct was softened by love for himself. For, looking into his honest eyes, the truth appeared impossible.

Answering an advertisement, she had accepted a position as governess. She had been well educated—sufficiently well at all events to teach the twelve and fourteen year old daughters of the mother who wrote to her. The salary was small—pitifully small—but in an exaggerated heroic mood she reflected that nothing would ever again be of the slightest consequence, since John had failed her.

She secured the baggage containing her modest outfit; far different from that bridal one with which John presently ruefully returned. She took the next train to Eldom, where her young intending pupils lived.

When at last she was seated in the long, old-fashioned drawing-room of a comfortable, pretty house and had begun to feel that here at last was a haven of refuge, her new employer soon dispelled the illusion.

She was a brisk, gaunt woman with suspicious eyes, and these scanned and scrutinized the new governess with no approving looks.

After a few conventional remarks, she left the room. She returned in a few minutes and stood with a determined air before Pamela. "I am sorry to say," she informed her, frigidly, "that I fear you will not suit me. I require a simple, quiet young woman to train my two girls in an old-fashioned, quiet fashion. Your appearance, your dress"—her suspicious eyes ran up and down the poor bride's beautiful travelling gown. She spread her hands significantly. She took out her purse. "Allow me to return your fare. I am sorry," she added, melting somewhat before the girl's blank, shrinking face, "but it is best to deal frankly with you. And you are not at all suited to the position I have to offer."

Almost before she could collect her thoughts further than indignantly to refuse the proffered fare, Pamela found herself once more at the railway station only in time to take the last train back to the home she had left in the morning.

"Good gracious, Pamela," her aunt began when the poor bride fell, worn and weeping, into her arms.

Two days later she sat in the old and well-loved garden the dreariest, weariest girl in the world, trying to face the situation. It was impossible for her to remain here. John would presently return; the neighbors would discover her. She shuddered, deciding upon offering her services again as a governess. Her first experience had been unpromising. She was rational enough, however, to blame nobody but herself. Who in her senses would have presented herself in such a capacity garbed in bridal attire? In her agitation convention had been overlooked. Next time, she determined, her dress should not certainly err on the side of magnificence.

All of a sudden, as she dreamily pondered, John leaped the fence, as, months before, while he was still engaged to Lilian, he had leaped it and carried her off riding.

In a few strides he had her in his arms. He kissed her passionately, rapturously. Then he took her two hands and, holding her from him, reproached her.

"Pamela, Pamela, how could you treat me so cruelly? What I have suffered! Why didn't you speak, dear? That confounded will wasn't worth the paper it was written on. My great-grandfather must have been a feeble, fickle sort of chap. Before six months were out he had married another woman and had made another will."

There was an interval for kisses. Then: "But, John, dearest," she faltered, "when the trouble arose with Lilian, why didn't you speak?"

He looked confused. He laughed, embarrassed. Then he said. "To tell you the truth, Pam, I hadn't the slightest desire to convince Lilian of anything but that she had excellent reason for throwing me over. You see I had found out then who it was I really loved."

Another interval for kisses.

Then "But John, dear," she began again. "Why didn't you, at all events, tell me?"

"I wasn't sure what you might do," he said, "and you see I judged you rightly. It was an excellent opportunity for a quixotic, generous, darling little woman to save me from disgrace. And I wanted you at all costs."

They resumed their honeymoon.

NEXT WEEK: A Worthless Experiment

By F. Hopkinson Smith